



America's Historical Treasure Chest

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Since its founding, the United States of America has been a beacon of liberty to the entire world. The colonists fought for freedom, and many have sacrificed to extend it. Particularly in the past century, we have been generous in helping spread worldwide the individual liberties that have helped the U.S. achieve prosperity and success.

While we labor to extend freedom around the world, we must not forget the principles on which our own democracy is based. It's particularly important that young Americans appreciate our rich U.S. history, and the struggles that have accompanied development of our country, and the blessings of a free and educated society.

To accomplish that, there's no substitute for a first-hand look at the landmarks of our democratic heritage. Many Texans are able to visit Washington, D.C. and see precious historical documents at the National Archives near the Capitol.

In the building's central rotunda are The Charters of Freedom—the actual original documents (under glass of course) of the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. There's even one of four existing original copies of the Magna Carta there as well.

Nothing is more memorable than a personal encounter with history. But in this cyber age, the National Archives and Record Administration (NARA) has established a Web site that may be an even better learning tool for the principles and experiences that have shaped our nation.

NARA is the agency that preserves our government and historical records. It also provides public access to the written and recorded material that collectively comprises American history. The primary sources available include millions of documents and photographs, and countless hours of recorded history, in Washington, regional archives, and Presidential libraries.

History teachers usually want their students to examine "primary sources," and for good reason. These are original documents, created in the time period being studied, by people who actually participated in or witnessed events. They allow the reader to get as close as possible to history.

When I was in school, as a practical matter, access to primary sources was extremely limited. They could be found in a few books, usually available to most only through the public library system.

But today, in our digitalized society, students and educators can open the documents that record our country's development from their personal computer through the Internet. None is more relevant to American history and current events than the Web site of the NARA, www.archives.gov.

As the school year gets under way this fall, I hope parents, teachers and students are aware of the treasure chest of information available through primary documents on this interactive Web site.

Students can print out a copy of the Declaration of Independence and sign it themselves. They can meet our Founding Fathers, those chosen to participate in the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and get acquainted through their biographical sketches. The site contains facts that bring history alive to elementary and secondary school pupils.

The same primary documents at the Archives building are also on display at the NARA Web site. A visitor can also delve deeply into important moments in our history. There's a recording of President Franklin Roosevelt reading a declaration of war against Japan in 1941. Also on virtual display are President John Kennedy's speech index cards—including "Ich bin ein Berliner"—from his 1963 speech at the Berlin Wall.

There's also a wealth of original documents across the decades, recording Jefferson's purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848, Lincoln's letters to his generals, Indian treaties, and the drives to extend voting rights to women and freed slaves.

For those interested in how their own ancestors fit into the landscape of American history, the Web site also contains genealogical research information. The breadth of resources available – from family trees to landmark historic events – is inspiring.

Even when we read about despotism and tyranny abroad, or see their violent legacy in televised news reports, it's easy to take for granted the blessings of democracy that we all enjoy. An appreciation of U.S. history, and the incredible difficulties our country has faced and overcome, helps put today's problems in perspective.

A visit to the National Archives – in person or online – is well worth the time of all citizens, and especially our students. It's also a worthwhile investment in our future.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column.